The TX-0 is alive and well and living in Marlborough

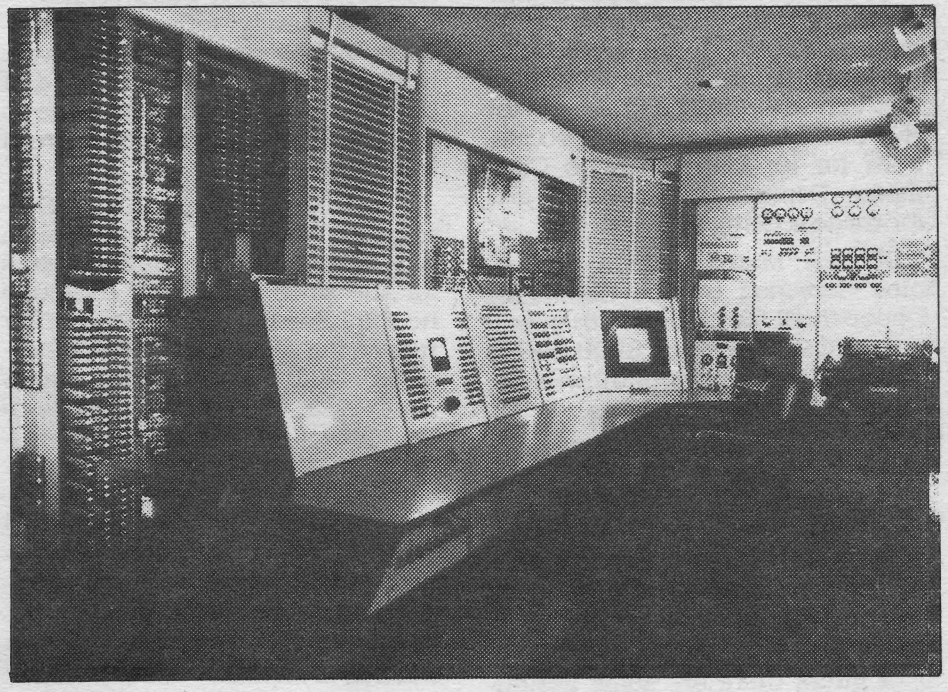
by Alan R. Earls

TX-0, MIT's experimental transistorized computer from the 50's, as well as dozens of other computers and components salvaged from the junk heap of the space age, have found a new home.

While TX-0 is one of the few actually in working order, the others rest neither in peace nor pieces.

Their home is the new Computer Museum in Marlborough — host to machines that range from Hermann Hollerith's 19th century punched card tabulator to microcomputers only a few years old. In the few months since it opened its doors, the museum has become a Mecca to high-tech tourists who scrutinize every private part of the vintage machinery seeking clues to the past and inspiration for the future.

Carol Strecker of the Museum Store displays a selection of computer earrings, tietacks, and stickpins fashioned from integrated circuits. [Photo by Chris Parent]



The TX-0, the first transistorized computer, has been restored to its original state, as it looked at MIT in the late fifties. **[Photo courtesy of The Computer Museum]**

According to Director Gwen Bell, the idea for the museum came from several sources.

"When Ken Olsen, President of Digital Equipment Corp., and Robert Everett, President Of MITRE Corp. saved MIT's original Whirlwind computer from the scrap heap in 1973 and arranged for its exhibit at the Smithsonian, they also envisioned a place where other such treasures could be preserved."

In addition, her husband Gordon Bell had been collecting computer artifacts and histories since the late 60's in anticipation of a possible future museum.

Meanwhile Olsen had purchased TX-0 when it came up for auction. "Soon the word got around that he was maintaining a warehouse for old computers. Industry responded by donating a LINC, PDP-8, and other machines that would otherwise have been junked."

At Gordon's suggestion, a space at Digital Equipment's "tower building" was evaluated for its suitability as an exhibit area. The building's occupants agreed, and — following a period of initial work — the museum opened modestly, and privately in 1979.

Since that time Gwen Bell has spearheaded the effort to turn a private collection into a full-fledged public museum.

"Digital Equipment Corporation not only provided start up funding but also encouraged its employees to donate their time and talents. The birth of the [public] Museum is coincident with the 25th anniversary of the founding of the company: the Museum is the corporation's 25th birthday present to the public."

Will the "public" museum remain housed at Digital Equipment Corp.? Says Bell, "It is rather like asking an eligible debutante whom she will marry...we are happy here for now, have numerous options, but would ideally like to be closer to public transportation."

Taken as a whole, the exhibits mark the progress of man's efforts to automate intellectual functions and include, in addition to computing machinery, an array of early typewriters, a German World War II encryptation device, a model of a punched-tape controlled Jacquard loom, and a large number of mechanical calculators.

The museum, according to Bell, represents by far the largest collection of its kind in the world.

But Bell points out that because "the machines are mostly just skin and bones and rather lifeless from a curator's standpoint," it was neccessary to plan layout and supporting exhibits carefully.

Using PMS taxonomy (a notation system he and Allen Newell developed for characterizing information systems while coauthoring **Computer Structures** in the late 60's), Gordon Bell developed text for all of the Museum's explanatory panels.

The result is something that conveys the history of computing machines with more immediacy and impact than any book.

Two other activities, beside housing exhibits, round out the Museum's functions.

An ongong lecture series has hosted luminaries from the computer era such as Maurice Wilkes, asociated with the 1940's development of EDSAC at Cambridge University in England. Their discussions are then preserved on video tape.

The museum also houses a museum store, which provides an ongoing source of funds. It features new and used computer-related books; tie tacks, stickpins, and earrings designed around IC chips; magnetic core memory modules; a 'one-byte' chocolate calculator; and even antique magnetostrictive delay-line memory device originally manufactured by Astro Circuit Corp.

Carol Strecker at the store asserts that their selection of readables, collectibles, wearables, and edibles is "as unique as the Museum itself." In addition almost all of the items they stock relate directly to an exhibit.

The museum, which so far has attracted an average of 50 people each day, is open from 1-6 Sunday through Friday and admission is free.